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PROGRAMME PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Harmonization of programme cycles and programming procedures among members of the Joint Consultative Group on Policy

Report of the Administrator

SUMMARY

The present report is in response to the request contained in Governing Council decision 92/28 of 26 May 1992 for information on progress achieved in the harmonization of programme cycles and programming procedures among members of the Joint Consultative Group on Policy (JCGP). The report shows that harmonization of programme cycles has taken place in about one third of the countries served. It also contains information on the harmonization of programming procedures in three areas: (a) harmonization of key terms; (b) simplification of financial and reporting procedures; and (c) payments to government staff. Finally, it recalls General Assembly resolution 47/199, in which the General Assembly reiterates the call for harmonization and points out that JCGP is actively following up on these requests, building on initiatives that have already been taken.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In its decision 92/28 of 26 May 1992, the Governing Council requested the Administrator to report to it at its fortieth session on "progress achieved in the harmonization of programme cycles and programming procedures among members of the Joint Consultative Group on Policy" (JCGP).

2. JCGP was established in 1981 as a forum for the exchange of information among United Nations specialized agencies primarily concerned with funding operational activities to strengthen their collaboration in programme and project planning, funding, implementation and evaluation. The current members of JCGP are the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). One of the most important JCGP concerns is to harmonize the programming of operational activities among the partner agencies, including programme development, review, monitoring and evaluation.

3. The harmonization and synchronization of programme and project cycles among the partner agencies is considered as an important element in working towards the goal of harmonization. It has received close attention from JCGP since the mid-1980s. In its resolution 44/211 of 22 December 1989, the General Assembly called upon all funding agencies of the United Nations system to adapt their programme cycles at the field level to the planning and programming cycles of national Governments. This provided new impetus to JCGP's own initiatives.

4. In the area of harmonizing programme procedures, the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) has been concerned with a range of coordination issues. Through its sub-group on harmonization, created in 1989, the JCGP has concentrated on the following programme issues currently of special concern to operational funds: (a) compilation and harmonization of key terms used in programming; (b) simplification of accounting and reporting procedures; and (c) payment of government personnel.

5. JCGP also engages in harmonization activities that do not fall within the purview of the present report. For example, it seeks to harmonize programmes in substantive areas such as women in development, poverty alleviation, development in Africa, structural adjustment, and drug prevention and control. It is developing collaborative mechanisms to promote the use of common premises and administrative and other services at the field level and for joint action on personnel and training issues. Moreover, in a number of countries, at the request of the Government, common country strategies are being developed. As a matter of principle, the members of JCGP also participate in one another's programming exercises to facilitate coordination.

II. HARMONIZATION AND SYNCHRONIZATION OF PROGRAMME/PROJECT CYCLES

6. In 1989 and again in May 1990, JCGP wrote to members' field representatives requesting them to approach host Governments with a view to bringing about a synchronization of their programme cycles with national cycles. Some progress has since been made in the harmonization and adaptation of the programming

cycles of UNDP, UNICEF and UNFPA with the planning periods of Governments. As WFP and IFAD do not have programming cycles as such, they have not been included in this exercise.

7. In 1992, the United Nations Secretariat sent a questionnaire to all Resident Representatives requesting, inter alia, information on the harmonization of programming cycles of JCGP organizations. Responses indicated that harmonization of programming cycles of JCGP organizations with government planning cycles had been achieved in nearly 30 countries.

8. Replies to the questionnaire indicated that in almost one quarter of the countries that replied, adaptation to national cycles had not yet occurred. Adaptation to government cycles had not been possible in at least 18 countries because the Governments did not have a formal plan and in at least five other countries because they had only one-year budget cycles. Other countries were operating under a structural adjustment framework with a three-year rolling cycle, while the norm for United Nations agency cycles tended to be five years.

9. In another group of countries, the adaptation of programme cycles to national cycles had not been initiated in part because of a perception that existing planning cycles established at the organizational headquarters could not be modified. One country objected to synchronizing planning cycles because of a shortage of government resources required to review all United Nations programmes at the same time. Some Governments preferred the United Nations system to formulate its programmes one year after the national plan had been agreed upon. Others preferred United Nations system programmes to be designed one year in advance of the national plan to allow for greater assistance to be provided for the formulation process. Given the time required to prepare and approve country programmes, effective synchronization with national planning cycles and among United Nations agencies themselves may require different approaches in different circumstances.

10. About 60 per cent of the Resident Coordinators who reported indicated that plans existed for further adaptation (including those for United Nations specialized agencies and some bilaterals) to government cycles.

11. The current target set by the Secretary-General in his triennial review of operational activities of the United Nations system (A/47/419) is to double the number of countries where there is harmonization of programme cycles from one third to about two thirds of the countries served in the near future. The heads of the JCGP organizations, at the high-level meeting of JCGP in January 1993, agreed to continue to explore ways of harmonizing programme cycles with Governments and with one another and to seek further data from their field offices on the status of harmonization.

III. HARMONIZATION OF PROGRAMMING PROCEDURES

12. JCGP has also targeted programming procedures as a priority for review and action. Almost 60 per cent of the respondents to the United Nations questionnaire believed current United Nations procedures were an obstacle to other efforts at harmonization. Of these, 90 per cent mentioned that standardization of United Nations system procedures for both programming and

administration was needed and that appraisal/evaluation criteria, reporting formats, and funding rules should all be standardized or simplified. On the other hand, it was also reported that harmonizing United Nations procedures was perceived by some recipient Governments as strengthening the United Nations position and weakening the government position since many government bodies were accustomed to dealing with each United Nations agency separately, thus ensuring a division of labour among interested parties.

13. The following paragraphs describe the current efforts of JCGP to simplify and harmonize procedures for operational activities.

A. Harmonization of key terms

14. The JCGP sub-group on harmonization, in the implementation of General Assembly resolution 44/211, commissioned a review of terms used by members of JCGP in the context of their development cooperation activities. It was believed that several key terms were being used differently by different agencies. JCGP adopted the Secretary-General's approach contained in document A/45/273, paragraph 157, in which the aim of harmonization of terminology is defined as reaching "common system-wide understanding of the operational meaning of key concepts and terminology rather than total uniformity of understanding and usage".

15. JCGP reviewed the term "programme" as used in concepts such as: programme approach, country programme, national programme framework, integrated operational response to a national programme framework and project. Another term reviewed was "programming", used to describe process. Different perspectives on what constitutes programming exist in the United Nations system, as revealed in various perceptions of concepts such as the harmonization of programming and of programme cycles, collaborative programming, coordinated programming, joint programming and integrated programming. A third term reviewed was "execution" as applied in such concepts as national execution, decentralization, delegation of authority, and accountability.

16. One conclusion of the study was that most of these terms were undergoing changes as a result of developments in the field of technical cooperation and that United Nations entities, in the process of consultation on these supposedly new features of technical cooperation, were also striving to arrive at a common understanding of them. Agency usage depended on a number of factors, including the nature of the agency's role in technical cooperation; the pace of operationalizing resolution 44/211, where many of these terms (some of which were already widely used) were employed to discuss new directions for technical cooperation and were thus being redefined; recipient Governments' own usage; and other donors' usage.

17. JCGP has examined the way these terms have been used; considered how meanings are changing to meet new requirements, and sought agreement on possible common usage where there is common understanding. This exercise is still under way and a report is being prepared.

B. Simplification of financial and reporting procedures

18. Each JCGP member has its own accounting and audit requirements. Recognizing the burden which these varying requirements place on many Governments, JCGP commissioned a comparative study by an independent consultancy firm to identify the similarities and differences. In view of the nature of services provided by IFAD and WFP, it was agreed that the study would be confined to UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF, while the findings would be shared with IFAD and WFP.

19. The study was completed in April 1992, and distributed to JCGP members, who found it to be accurate and well executed. The study of the written requirements of each organization revealed certain major categories of differences, namely in: (a) banking arrangements; (b) requests for advances/reimbursement; (c) accounting for advances (expenditure reporting); (d) non-cash assistance/direct payments; (e) annual reporting; (f) maintenance of records; specific books/ledgers; (g) audit.

20. Having identified these primary differences, the study then examined what is required of the Government by each organization in each of the above areas and how such requirements differ.

21. The comparative study, with the agreement of the JCGP members, was made available to the project on the harmonization and simplification of aid accounting requirements, currently being implemented by the United Nations, which provides a core technical project team in support of a working group composed of bilateral and multilateral donors, as well as selected developing countries. The objective of the project is to harmonize and simplify donors' aid accountability requirements and to formulate accountability standards suitable for adoption by donors and host countries.

22. JCGP will continue to seek ways in which the financial reporting of its member organizations may be harmonized and simplified. It feels, however, that specific moves in that direction should be made, preferably in the context of the broader effort currently under way, which embraces most significant donor countries and multilateral institutions, as well as taking into account the views and capabilities of host countries.

23. Recommendations from the United Nations-supported working group are expected to emerge in the second half of 1993.

C. Payments to government staff

24. JCGP has also been developing a common approach to the issue of donor payments to government staff on development projects. The question of external payments to government staff has been the subject of discussion in the governing bodies of the members of JCGP as well as the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The Governing Council considered this issue at its thirty-seventh session (1990), at which it adopted decision 90/16. Following this decision, the Administrator undertook an initiative with one Government to coordinate with

other donors the comprehensive salary supplement scheme as part of the Government's efforts at administrative and civil service reform.

25. This issue affects all of the members of JCGP, who believed that a coordinated and joint policy on the question of payments to government staff working on development projects was the only viable solution to the problem of widely varying approaches to employment and supplementary payments.

26. To address the question, JCGP established a working group which will recommend a common policy for its members concerning the employment of government staff on projects and direct supplementary payments to them. The first action of the working group was to send a joint letter from the heads of the JCGP members to all field representatives requesting them to gather information on current practices concerning payment to government staff by donors.

27. The common approach will aim at ensuring the full involvement of Governments in any arrangement that would strengthen the civil service, in some cases through the provision of extrabudgetary resources from donors. It will hopefully also lead to a coherent JCGP initiative for broad donor coordination on this matter at the field level and to a joint donor/government implementation strategy on the involvement and remuneration of national personnel in development projects and in the strengthening of the civil service.

IV. FOLLOW-UP TO GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 47/199

28. At the JCGP high-level meeting held on 12 January 1993, it was agreed to set up a task force to prepare an initial report on JCGP follow-up to General Assembly resolution 47/199 of 22 December 1992 on the triennial policy review of the operational activities of the United Nations development system. The report will provide inputs to the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council in New York in 1993.

29. Notably, in paragraph 10 of its resolution 47/199, the General Assembly reaffirms that the funding agencies of the United Nations and the funds administered by UNDP should harmonize their cycles and where appropriate to adapt them to national budget cycles, plans and strategies.

30. In paragraph 33, the General Assembly requested JCGP in particular to give priority to simplifying, harmonizing and increasing the transparency of procedures relating to programme component and project formulation, appraisal, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and to reach agreement on a common United Nations system-wide manual for such procedures by 1 July 1994.

31. In paragraph 34, the General Assembly requests that JCGP in particular should put into place no later that 1 January 1995, measures to enhance accountability at the field level, including effective harmonized programme monitoring, evaluation and management audit standards.